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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to help primary school teachers encourage and support children in learning to write during the first years of school. It discusses learning to write in the years before formal schooling, focusing on mediated contact with print, involvement in the everyday functions of print, experimentation with print, and support and encouragement for young writers. The booklet also examines some common steps in children's writing development, focusing on the role-play writing phase, experimental writing phase, and the early writing phase. It then addresses writing in the first years of school, focusing on recent research in the teaching of writing, genres of writing for young children, teaching strategies, writing in the first year at school, and support techniques for beginning writers. (MDM)

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Write From the Start

supporting beginning writers

Julie Martello

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Write From the Start

supporting beginning writers

Julie Martello

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About the author: Julie Martello lectures in early childhood education at Charles Sturt University — Mitchell, in Bathurst. Her major teaching areas are child literacy development and educational drama. Her current research interest is in functional linguistics and beginning writers.

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"The major means

by which children in

our schools

formulate

knowledge and

relate it to their own

purposes and view

of the world are

speech and writing."

Douglas Barnes (1977)

Write From the Start

supporting beginning writers

Being able to write allows us to participate fully in the life of our communities and in the wider society. It is no wonder then, that learning to write is one of the primary goals of early schooling. Because we value both writing and reading so highly, educational resources are heavily focused on providing literacy programs at all levels. While literacy practices differ among social groups, and ideas about what constitutes literacy vary greatly, it is clear that literacy — as it is currently defined in schools and society — has high status. Part of the reason for this derives from the fact that writing is a means by which those who use it effectively can exercise power and influence others within the society. Consider the writing of political speeches, position papers, school curricula, newspaper editorials and television scripts as examples of potentially influential writing.

Over the past 10 years or so educators have acknowledged the political nature of writing and the importance of particular kinds of writing. This has led to suggested changes in both the teaching of writing in schools and in the kinds of writing taught. Broadly, the move is towards more explicit teaching strategies aimed at teaching a wider range of written forms or genres, particularly those factual genres considered to be essential to success in both schooling and society. In particular, the two strategies of modelling and joint writing, as they are redefined in recent research, are recommended as important means of supporting beginning writers in the first years of school.

Learning to write in the years before school

In the years before formal schooling adults seem to support children's early writing with the appropriate interaction and acceptance. A look at how writing development is supported before school will provide pointers for how continuity might be achieved in the early school years while accommodating the added demands of new approaches and syllabuses.

Children begin to develop ideas about the functions of writing — and about what writing might achieve for them personally — through everyday experiences with print (reading and writing) and the associated, explanatory adult/child interactions which accompany them (talking and listening). The four aspects of language development — talking, listening, reading and writing — are closely interrelated, and the understandings and processes involved in learning to write and learning to read inform and support each other.

It is now generally recognised that the processes of learning to read and write begin in babyhood when children are, for example, read to, shown books, sung songs and told rhymes and stories. It is not only the visual contact with print but the different patterns of language heard from these sources that contribute to the language experience of children and provide a rich resource on which they can draw to begin to make sense of print.

Children's early experiences with print, like those above, are highly enjoyable and often repeated. These experiences extend to the many other literacy events which children gradually become involved in, both in the home and in the wider community. Through adult/child interactions about shopping lists, road signs, labels, letters, recipes and many other forms of print, children develop awareness about what print is and how we use it to achieve particular

goals. From these early experiences with print it is possible to generalise some understandings which children develop about writing that may motivate them to want to begin to write themselves. Some of these early understandings are:

- writing is fun: you can participate in the adult world and increase your self-esteem (e.g. names, notices, stories);
- writing is useful: you can communicate with people (e.g. letter from Grandma), it helps you get things done (e.g. a shopping list), and you can find out about the world (e.g. book about snakes); and
- writing is lasting: you can remember something by referring to writing because it stays the same (e.g. party invitations, family photo captions).

Many children begin to show interest and ability in reading and writing before they go to school. Observation of this has provided us with valuable information about the kinds of environments and experiences which support early literacy learning and help children to develop the understandings noted above. Four kinds of experiences emerge from the literature as being of particular benefit and they are as relevant in homes as in early childhood centres. See Jennifer Sumsion's *Playing With Print* for a comprehensive discussion of practical ideas for organising the environment and experiences to support literacy development.

Children enjoy playing with print materials, especially when parents have much difficulty in reading the resultant 26-letter word!

Mediated contact with print

Children learn about print by seeing it and having it used and explained by the adults around them. Signs, labels, names and posters are unlikely to become meaningful unless they are written, read and discussed with children. The more extensive the range of reading and writing activities the child is exposed to and involved in, the more opportunities the child has to become interested and to understand underlying principles (e.g. what a 'word' is).

An environment rich in a variety of printed materials can stimulate children's interest and provide information if it is used and explained by competent language users. A few examples of how we can provide a productive, print-rich environment are:

- read children a range of written genres (literary and factual);
- write and read labels, signs etc. with children; and
- provide, and draw attention to, a wide range of printed texts and writing materials for children to explore by themselves.

Involvement in the everyday functions of print

Opportunities to participate in the literacy events which are happening around them at home, in the community, and in centres are important to children's literacy learning. They are particularly beneficial if a competent language user provides the interested child with the

support needed to contribute to the task. Simply explaining the procedures and goals of a reading or writing activity must help to demystify it for children.

By including children in the literacy events in our daily lives we are also demonstrating that reading and writing are important to adults and that we use them for a variety of purposes. These include for enjoyment, for maintaining personal relationships, and for getting and giving information, among others. Our real interest will make reading and writing doubly interesting to the young children who often strive to emulate us.

In relation to writing, here are some instantly recognisable ways in which adults involve children in the forms and functions of writing:

- ask a child to help compose a list (e.g. shopping) and then use it;
- jointly compose a letter to relatives or note to parents, then send it; and
- jointly compose a roster of children to take turns in a play activity, then follow it.

Experimentation with print

Children progress in their ability to write as they practice what they already know and gradually meet new challenges. Where homes and centres provide children with a range of writing materials and the space and time in which to explore them, children have many opportunities to experiment with and practice their current understandings about writing. So, along with the two previous kinds of activities, it is important for children to have lots of opportunities to actually write, at whatever level they can.

It is interesting to note that many children in the earliest stages of their writing development attempt to use a variety of text types, for example, lists, notes, signs, letters and stories. This is one strong argument for extending the range of written genres that are taught and used in the first years of school.

Writing materials can be placed in dramatic play areas, both indoors and outdoors, to encourage children to write for the social purposes they have observed, for example, in the post office, bank, hairdressers or supermarket. Schickedanz (1986) provides an extensive list of suggestions for including literacy props in dramatic play areas. Teacher-led drama activities can also be used to create contexts where literacy activities are fostered within the framework of the drama.

Support and encouragement

It makes sense that the kind of encouragement and support that we give children as they learn to talk is also needed as they learn to write. When a baby or young child learning to talk babbles or attempts to say a word the adult reaction is usually one of delight and affirmation. We give the beginner unequivocal messages that their efforts are heard and appreciated and this motivates them to continue their efforts and therefore their development.

The process of learning to write might seem a daunting task from our perspective yet young children take it on willingly and with enthusiasm. Maintaining this positive attitude to writing is essential for continued development and is largely determined by the responses of significant adults.

Parents, caregivers and teachers who understand something of the steps children take in learning to write can best provide the appropriate encouragement to the beginning writer. We need to be able to recognise children's attempts at writing and show that we value them. Giving positive responses to children's writing is the best way to ensure that they will continue to practice and, consequently, to progress.

Some common steps in children's writing development

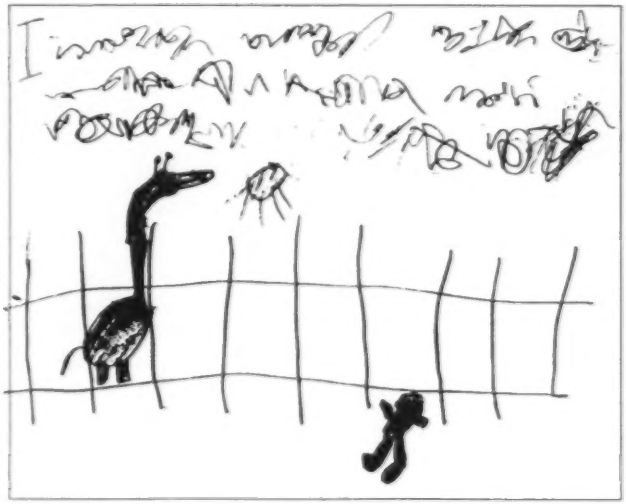
In order to respond appropriately to children's writing we need to be able to recognise when they are actually attempting writing. This involves knowing something about the common characteristics observed in the many thousands of examples of children's early writing and writing behaviour, that have been studied in the literature on this topic.

Since each child develops understandings and skills in writing differently, it is important that these characteristics are not seen as obligatory steps in a lock-step sequence. Instead, each child, depending on their experience and preferences, will discover and recreate the written language system using a few, many or all of these steps. The names of the phases outlined below follow those used in the *First Steps* materials (Ministry of Education, WA, 1994). Other major sources for the following summary are Department of School Education, NSW (1994) and Schickedanz (1986).

Role-play writing phase

In this earliest phase children are beginning to show their understanding of written language by engaging in writing-like behaviour. They may ascribe a meaning to the marks they make or may be simply copying adult behaviour.

Scribble Scribble can take many forms. It can be differentiated from drawing by its print-like linear shapes. It often accompanies a drawing as labelling and is noticeably different to it. Scribble often occurs in short segments and these can be repeated. It is the intention to write which is important here and children themselves will be able to indicate which is drawing and which is writing.



Role-play writing

Invented cursive writing Some children write long lines of marks, sometimes pages of them, to emulate adult cursive writing.

Invented letters These are letter-like shapes which often show experimentation with the number of strokes, joining of strokes and the orientation of the shape. Shapes often resemble or include numbers and can be arranged in long strings, groups or singly. Children doing this are beginning to show an awareness of the necessity for writing to take particular shapes.

Conventional letters When standard letters begin to appear they are often letters from the child's name. They may be combined with invented letters and, though recognisable, they may not be entirely regular in shape, size or orientation, particularly in relation to other letters. Letters can be arranged in strings, in groups with spaces between or singly. As children experiment with letter shapes we can acknowledge their growing understanding of

the conventional nature of writing i.e. not just any shapes but particular shapes constitute writing.

Tracing and copying Many children use tracing or copying as a means to practice writing, particularly their names, and this probably gives them a sense of accomplishment to know that they are approaching or achieving the adult standard. Copying or tracing needs to be balanced with children's own experimentation with writing for real progress to be made.

Experimental writing phase

In this phase children are beginning to show an understanding of the relationship between spoken and written language. They know that speech can be written down and that, once written, the message does not change. They are able to hear sounds in spoken language and represent them with some appropriate letters in their writing. Children in this phase are also beginning to understand how print is organised on the page, e.g. top to bottom, left to right, spaces between words, and to experiment with this awareness in their writing.

Invented/temporary spelling Children will use whatever information they have about letter/sound correspondence to try to represent the sounds of spoken language with written symbols. As their knowledge increases they will incorporate more letters and more standard spellings into their writing. Invented spelling, if properly supported with appropriate reading, writing and teaching activities, develops quickly into standard spelling. Children will work their way through several stages of spelling while developing knowledge about the many ways that particular letters, and combinations of letters, represent the sounds of English. Graves (1983:185) reports that progress often follows the sequence in this example:

Initial consonant	F
Initial and final consonant	FR
Initial, final and medial consonants	FLWR
Initial, final, medial consonants and vowel	FLUWER
Conventional spelling that also needs visual memory	FLOWER

Mixed upper and lower case letters Children often use both upper and lower case letters in unconventional ways until they have sufficient experience and information about their appropriate use.

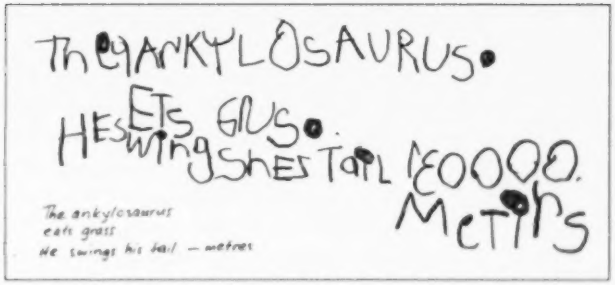
Unconventional spatial organisation Children often organise print on the page in non-standard ways. For example, words may be arranged vertically rather than horizontally or a word may be segmented inappropriately e.g. *to day* for *today*. Concepts to do with organisation, as with other information about print, require explicit demonstration for their development.

Early writing phase

As with any of these arbitrarily defined phases, each child's writing behaviour will not conform strictly to all the characteristics of this phase. There will usually be an overlapping with previous and later phases. Whatever their current knowledge and skill, children will use writing for their own purposes and write on topics of personal significance with little or no sense of the reader.

Sentences Children begin to show a sense of language structure by writing complete sentences, with or without punctuation.

Standard spelling Some standard spellings will gradually appear in a child's writing. These may be the child's name, names of family members and other frequently used or seen words Invented spellings will still be much in evidence but these will occur alongside a growing repertoire of standard spellings of known words.



This example of early writing contains both standard and non-standard spellings, and demonstrates the writer's developing knowledge of direction and punctuation

Written genres Children are able to write increasingly in a range of written genres extending from personally-oriented writing — e.g. diaries, descriptions, and recounts — to writing for a wider audience, such as procedures and reports. These genres are briefly defined later.

The WA writing development continuum (Ministry of Education, 1994) follows these phases with the two further phases of conventional and advanced writing which are useful as guides to later development. The focus here is on the beginnings of writing in the three phases described above.

Writing in the first years at school

The early writing phases outlined here may be well underway for some children in the preschool years, while for other children formal schooling may present their first opportunities to experiment with and learn about print. Children with non-English-speaking backgrounds or from communities where non-standard forms of English are used may need approaches which treat English as a second language. Awareness and acceptance of each child's experience and knowledge of written English is a necessary starting point for further development.

What is appropriate for developing writing in the preschool years is equally appropriate in the first years of school. The added demands of prescribed curricula, timetables or required outcomes should not and need not conflict with the needs of young children learning to write. Daily activities where children are given opportunities to write, shown how to write, helped to write and given positive responses to their writing efforts are still the most appropriate learning strategies when children begin school, particularly if they are presented in a meaningful and enjoyable context.

Recent research and teaching writing in schools

Two influential ideas to come out of recent research and reflection on children's writing will have an impact on how writing is taught in the first years of school. These ideas relate to how children learn language and the range of language young children use and have access to.

Idea 1: Children learn language through interaction with adults

The importance of adult/child interaction in the development of oral language has been acknowledged for a long time. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that without interaction with competent language users children would not learn to speak. Research into what kinds of

interaction best assist children's language learning has focused recently on the notion of 'scaffolding'. The term is based on the work of Vygotsky and Bruner and describes the role of the adult in assisting a child to achieve a language task that the child could not achieve alone, e.g. retell an incident. Having rehearsed the process, perhaps several times, with an adult the child is then able to perform the language task independently.

Some central aspects of the adult's role in scaffolding are to ask questions, repeat or rephrase the child's statements and to generally help shape the language into a successful example of what is being attempted. By drawing out relevant details, e.g. 'How did the plate get broken?' or 'And what did daddy do then?', the adult helps the child to retell an incident more completely for an uninformed listener. The focus of the interaction is on the meaning the child is trying to make. The adult assists and guides, rather than directs, the exchange.

While observations show that many adults and even older siblings provide this kind of support for young children learning to talk, it has not been a technique widely used in the teaching of written language. Current syllabuses, however, are beginning to require teachers to take account of the central place of adult/child interaction in written language learning.

Idea 2: Children learn that language differs for different purposes.

Children begin to understand from a very early age that language varies according to who is speaking and what the social situation is. Listening to children role-play fictional characters provides ready examples of how they can change not only voice quality but vocabulary and even language structure to reflect their understanding of the situation. When a three-year-old, role-playing Mighty Mouse, says 'You won't get away with this, Harry!', we get a glimpse of the range of language registers to which children have access.

Similarly, children's first attempts at writing reflect their diverse experience of written language — ranging from signs, labels and notices to letters, stories and meeting notes. Recognition that children are both interested in and able to attempt many different writing genres adds weight to moves for a broadening of the scope of the writing curriculum in the first years of schooling.

Many of the changes to the teaching of writing being currently suggested can be traced to these two central ideas about language and language learning. There is now more of a focus on the different writing genres that young children can learn to use than in the past 15 years or so when the process of writing dominated the primary school writing curriculum. A balance of attention to both the processes and the products of writing is the likely outcome of recent research and reflection. Similarly, the strategies that we use to teach writing have been extended to reflect those used to help children to learn to speak by including more explicit modelling and more interaction through joint teacher/pupil writing. These strategies to benefit beginning writers will be taken up again after a look at the kinds of writing that should have a place in the early writing curriculum.

Which written genres for beginning writers?

Four broad categories of writing will be suggested here as a starting point towards expanding the early writing curriculum. The categories overlap considerably but their advantage is in providing a framework which attempts to highlight and to balance different educational needs. They are:

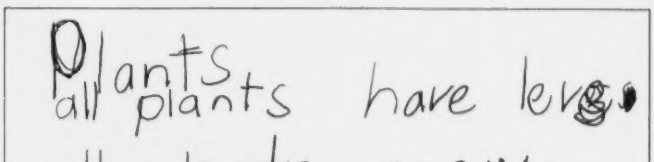
- Personal experience genres — about children's own experiences;
- Community genres — used in the daily life of people in our society;
- Narrative genres — stories, fictional or factual; and
- Factual genres — about the way things are in the world, both within and outside of children's direct experience.

Personal experience genres This is the name which has been given to the kinds of writing which probably constitute the majority of children's writing in the first years at school because they are about children's own experience either directly or in the drawings which represent those experiences. Genres included here are *labelling* (of a drawing, photo etc.), *observation/comment* (statements and opinions about things and events in children's lives), *diary* (daily account of events) and *recount* (a sequenced retelling of a past experience). These genres play an important role in facilitating the transition from the oral to the written mode of language. Children usually write these genres in language which is closely linked to their oral language. Consequently both the language and the content — their own experience — are familiar elements to be drawn upon in learning the new and challenging mode of writing.

The personal experience genres have another important function as learning experiences for the young writer. By consciously reflecting on experience and selecting salient details, the writer is interpreting that experience and focusing, often for the first time, on the meaning it has for her or him. Contrasts and similarities with other experiences can be noted and the development of classifications and generalisations begun. As a way of learning about the self and the world the personal experience genres have a place of importance in the early writing curriculum.

Community genres Children derive a great deal of pleasure from engaging in the kinds of writing that they have observed adults and older children using as part of their daily lives. Genres such as *invitations*, *rules*, *notices*, *lost and found announcements*, *advertisements*, *lists*, *cards* and *letters* demonstrate the real-life functions of writing and must contribute significantly to children's understanding of the purposes of print. It is no wonder that children enjoy using these genres because they become participants in the wider community and this seems to enhance their self-esteem.

Narrative genres The *narrative* or *story* genres provide a third broad category of writing which can be taken up in the early years of school. Stories are very familiar to most children and they are recognised as a powerful means of organising experience and of learning from it. Because of children's familiarity with stories, they often understand a lot about story structures, content and language, and many become capable story writers in the first few years of school.



A young writer's personal experience provides an indispensable link to knowledge about the world in general

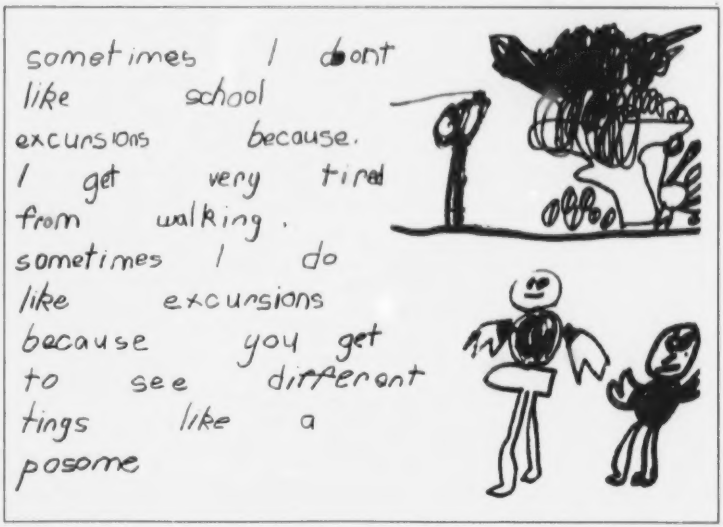
Factual genres Factual writing can be described as writing about the way things are. Its purpose is to explain and explore the world around

us. In order to accommodate the needs and interests of beginning writers, factual writing can be differentiated into two categories depending on the type of fact involved, that is:

1. facts relating to personal experience; and
2. facts relating to wider society, outside of own experience.

Beginning writers might begin with just the first category and gradually, as their knowledge and writing skills permit, extend into the second. Young children, especially, need to be able to relate new knowledge to themselves and their own experience. Consequently, much of their factual writing will be about their own experience. Even when it is about the 'world out there' they will often need to adopt a personal viewpoint rather than the impersonal, objective style still considered by some to be appropriate for adult factual writing.

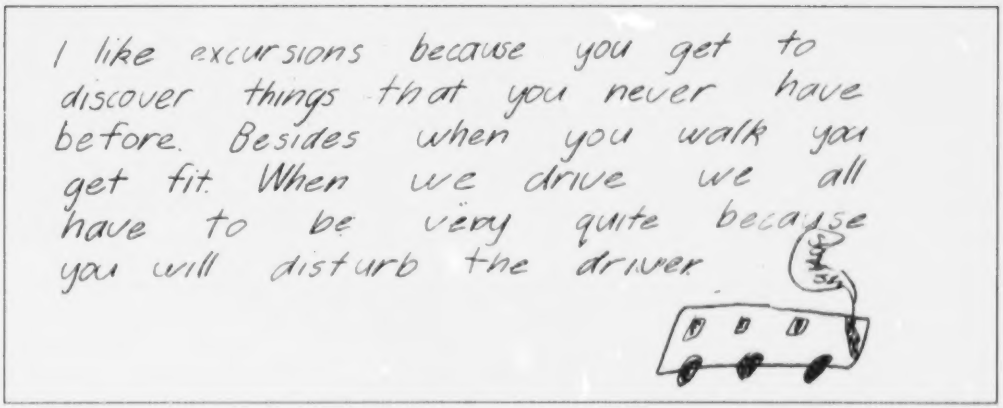
Apart from the fact that children can learn about the world through factual writing and reading, they can also benefit from a gradual, planned introduction to factual genres which are an essential part of school learning. By learning to use expository texts at a level appropriate to their development, children will be better prepared to deal with the reading and writing demands of later schooling. This alone is not a sound argument for the early introduction of factual genres but combined with the understanding that children can use factual genres and enjoy doing so, it becomes a practical imperative to include them in the writing curriculum, particularly in the second and third year of schooling.



Some factual writing prompts children to reflect on their experience and explain the reasons behind their opinions

Some factual genres which could be considered here are *descriptions* (what some particular thing is like), *reports* (what an entire class of things is like), *judgements* (reasoned opinion), *discussions* (putting a case for and against), *explanations* (of some phenomenon) and *procedures* (how something is made or done). While some of these genres require children to deal with knowledge largely outside of their own experience, i.e. *reports* and *explanations*, the others allow for personal experience and opinion to be reflected upon in specific, organised ways.

Each of the factual genres noted above not only provides for wider writing experience but promotes different levels of thinking and different patterns of organising information. For example, in writing *descriptions* there is a requirement to include explicit details for an uninformed audience, as there is in *procedure* writing. However, the need for sequencing in *procedures* adds a further level of organisation. *Judgements* and *discussions* prompt children to state their opinions and to give reasons to support them. Because these genres ask children to


I like excursions because you get to discover things that you never have before. Besides when you walk you get fit. When we drive we all have to be very quite because you will disturb the driver

think logically about their assumptions and to provide reasoning, they contribute to children's overall cognitive development.

Which teaching strategies for beginning writers?

The four categories of writing genres outlined here give teachers a wide choice from which to plan a balanced writing program. Another crucial decision for teachers is how writing will be taught. The approaches commonly called 'process' offer a great deal of support to the beginning writer but need to be extended in the light of the two ideas discussed earlier. Firstly, interaction and guidance from the teacher can be used more than it currently is in the teaching of writing. Secondly, a wider range of written genres could be taught, including the factual ones considered important for success in later schooling and in society. These two ideas come together when we look for effective ways to introduce children to new written genres.

Departures from past practice

The strategies suggested in the current literature which are clearly different to those in current use are those of modelling and of joint teacher/pupil writing. One clear departure from past practices is that these strategies are to be used to teach explicitly about the structural, language and functional differences between written genres. So for each new genre being taught children are asked to consider how it is organised (e.g. a recipe usually begins with a list of ingredients, followed by sequenced instructions for the procedure to be followed), what kind of language is used (e.g. abbreviated commands such as 'Place dry ingredients in bowl' or 'Mix until combined') and what we use this kind of writing for in our society (e.g. to instruct uninformed others in how to make something). While *modelling* (writing for) and *jointly writing* (writing with) teachers comment on and question children on the three aspects noted above, making clear the social function and the structural/language features of the writing. Of course, this is done using terms and concepts appropriate to the children's level of understanding.

The strategies of modelling and joint writing are particularly relevant in the early years of school because they echo the child's natural, oral language learning and meaning-making experiences. In the context of early writing they are intended to help beginning writers achieve something they could not initially do by themselves. After adult interaction and guidance children are better prepared to attempt their own independent writing in a new genre. Any new written genres introduced to young writers, while chosen for their own intrinsic worth and suitability, need to be integrated into the wider social context of ongoing classroom activities.

Modelling When modelling the teacher uses an example text large enough for the whole class or a small group to see and explicitly explains particular attributes of the writing. The discussion can be focused on the three features noted above (structure, language and social function), the processes of writing (drafting, revising, editing, proofreading and publishing) or the conventions of writing (e.g. directionality, punctuation). The teacher can write the text explaining as she goes or use a ready-made text such as a big book or teacher-made chart.

The important point about modelling written language is that it needs to be more deliberate and explicit than the modelling of oral language because there are important differences between talking and writing and children cannot be expected to pick up all there is to know about written genres simply through being exposed to them. Current syllabuses are requiring teachers to know more about writing and to teach this to school children in open and appropriate ways. Modelling, with its explicit focus on teaching about writing, is one effective way of doing this.

Joint teacher/children writing In joint writing the teacher writes, often on a board or easel, in the presence of the class or group of children using their ideas as the content of the writing. She guides the composition of the text through the use of questions and comments that provide 'scaffolding' for the children's successful construction of meaning. The teacher's knowledge of structure, language and social function of a written genre informs her questions and comments and guides children towards the appropriate way of making meaning in a given context. For example, in writing an *invitation* the teacher might ask 'What do they (the receivers) need to know about this party?' and 'What do they need to know first?'. Like modelling, joint writing can be focused on writing processes, writing genres or the conventions of writing depending on the teacher's decisions about the needs of the children.

If the content of joint writing is based on a **shared experience** (teacher and children) then the process of guiding children towards a satisfactory text is facilitated further since the teacher can ask questions relevant to the experience and ensure that all class members participate in the writing. In early school years shared experiences such as book reading, excursions, visitors, experiments, special events and video viewing can be a productive source of writing activities. The strategy of joint writing and teacher scaffolding effectively exploits the learning potential of school experiences in relation to both context and text.

Another benefit of the strategy of joint writing, particularly for beginning writers in their first year at school, is that until children are capable of producing texts of their own they can participate in regular demonstrations of the process and functions of writing. For those children whose preschool experience has not included exposure to writing and its various functions, joint writing may be an essential prerequisite to literacy learning.

Writing in the first year at school

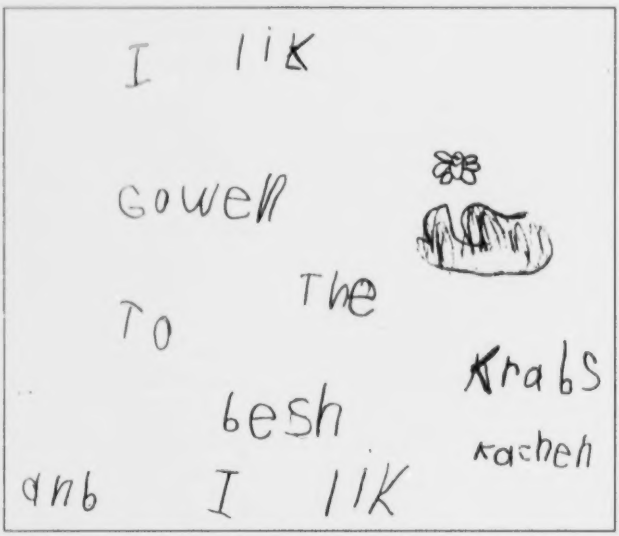
Young children beginning school will be at different stages in their writing development but many people, including children and teachers, expect that children will learn to read and write once at school. How to balance the sometimes conflicting expectations of the community and the school curriculum with the needs of individual children is a problem that requires careful attention. If children are encouraged to write daily, in whatever way they can, and they also receive daily demonstrations and explanations of reading and writing, they will gradually learn to understand and use the conventions of print.

For beginning writers in the first year at school the writing will usually be brief, perhaps only a sentence or two. It will be about matters of immediate concern to the child, such as the child's experiences, feelings, family, friends, home, pets or drawings. The language used will

be similar to speech as this is the form of language most natural and familiar to beginning writers. The writing is usually written in personal experience genres such as *observation/ comment* (as in daily diaries), *labelling* and *recount*. As teachers read and write a range of relevant genres for and with them, those children who are ready will begin to show an interest in writing in different genres themselves. Many will continue using only personal experience genres throughout the first year. Whatever developmental phase each child is in, these experiences allow them to continue to develop skills and understandings, particularly about the conventions governing print. The conventions of immediate concern to beginning writers are, broadly:

- **Directionality — Which way does the print go on the page? (i.e. left to right, return to left; top to bottom; left page then right page)**

  This can be taught using reading materials such as big books, song charts and labels which are in use in the classroom and in the modelling and joint writing done daily by the teacher to demonstrate writing.



"I like going to the beach and I like catching crabs". Children use what they know about the direction of writing, the shapes of letters and how letters represent sounds to spell words.

- **Sound/letter relationships and spelling — Which written letter represents this sound? or, How do I spell this word?**

  Although letters do not represent sounds on a one-to-one basis in English, children need to be shown how alphabet letters are used to represent the sounds heard in words. As part of early spelling development this is often begun through focusing on the initial sound in a word and noticing other words beginning with the same sound. This also should be taught in the context of real reading and writing activities in the classroom but requires systematic planning to ensure that commonly used letters and, later, letter combinations are brought to children's attention. Other spelling strategies, such as using visual memory or analogy, can be developed in the context of reading, class topic words and individual word lists.

- **Letter formation — How do I write the letter 'k'?**

  Handwriting can present a challenge to beginning writers because having to concentrate on it interferes with their ability to get their intended message written. Letter shapes and their formation using appropriate stroke direction need to be demonstrated and used regularly so that they become automatic. This can be done using letters, words and sentences relating to other classwork or to the children themselves, e.g. Mary made mud pies on Monday.

- **Print concepts — What is a 'letter'? 'sound'? 'word'? 'space'? 'sentence'?**

  For some children these, and others, like 'spell' and 'sound out', are baffling terms which are rarely explained or demonstrated but constantly referred to. It should never be taken for

granted that beginning writers understand the print concepts and terms used daily in classrooms. As with other aspects of writing, teachers need to regularly demonstrate and explain these terms.

- **Punctuation — What is a capital letter? When do we use a full stop?**

Basic punctuation which allows children to have their writing understood by readers can be demonstrated regularly in the teacher's modelling or joint writing.

Supporting beginning writers at school

Daily demonstrations With beginning writers, many teachers write a daily sentence or short text on the board or easel relating to the events of the day or other special news. This presents an opportunity to focus on aspects of writing conventions, such as those noted here. The teacher clearly explains what she is doing as a competent writer so that the children gain a clear understanding of what being a writer involves. A teacher might say, 'Notice how I begin with a capital letter? Do you remember what a capital letter is?'

Feeling like a writer In each of these aspects of teaching about the conventions of writing, those children who are ready to understand this kind of information will begin to try to use it in their own writing, while those not yet ready are not harmed by the teacher's explanations. What harms beginning writers is the expectation that they should write like competent adult writers from the start. Teachers who correct all of the beginning writer's spelling approximations or even rewrite *every* piece of writing in standard form are demonstrating that they think the child's effort is inadequate in some way. Acceptance of the child's approximations combined with teaching about specific conventions when it is needed demonstrates to children that what they are doing is appropriate for them at this stage of their writing development. This approach will ensure that children begin to feel like real writers from the start. It will provide both the encouragement and the information needed for further development.

Free choice and teacher-directed writing We can also help children to feel like real writers by allowing them to write for their own purposes and to feel the satisfaction of achieving their intentions through their writing. A balance of free choice and teacher-directed writing will ensure that children will have available to them a wide range of text types — those that the teacher has explicitly modelled and jointly written with them in teacher-directed activities — from which to choose for their own free-choice writing.

Sharing and publishing All writers, and particularly beginning writers, need an audience for their writing. A simple and effective way to achieve this in the classroom is to have children read or tell about their writing in a sharing circle. Beginning writers can have samples of their work reproduced in standard form by a competent writer. As children become more able they can revise and publish their own writing but the important point of any sharing, using or publishing is that children's efforts are acknowledged as being worthwhile and used for some purpose.

Creating contexts for writing Creating meaningful contexts for children's writing in the classroom is not always easy but it is important if children are to feel like real writers with real purposes for writing. Many teachers succeed in using every opportunity and in creating opportunities for children to share and use their writing. Obvious examples of purposeful writing are the letters, invitations and notes which are often sent to families and friends as part of ongoing school activities. Other classwork, such as literature, drama, social studies or science, also provides interesting and meaningful writing contexts. Teachers can support

children in their endeavour to be writers by helping them to find real readers for their writing, inside and outside the classroom.

A positive attitude to writing The challenges facing a beginning writer are great, yet children meet them initially with enthusiasm and hopeful anticipation. Any approach to writing must acknowledge the central importance of maintaining a child's interest and enthusiasm for writing if development is to occur. Writing must be perceived by the child as a means to achieve her or his own goals and to maintain, not diminish, self-esteem. The strategies of modelling and joint writing are particularly useful methods of supporting beginning writers in learning about the many facets of writing. If teachers can provide interesting, relevant writing contexts and positive responses to children's attempts at writing then children will maintain a positive attitude to writing, and therefore persevere in their efforts to write. A meaningful reason to write and the meaningful use of one's writing remain central concerns in supporting beginning writers.

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